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## The Canons of Dordt as a Missional Document

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**Editor's Note:** Dr. Lyle Bierma presented this paper at the Prodigal Love of God Conference, sponsored by Dordt University and co-sponsored by the Lilly Fellowship Program as a regional conference, April 2019, at Dordt University, in celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Canons of Dort.

In the subsequent articles, Dordt and Dort will be used interchangeably.

# The Canons of Dordt as a Missional Document

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by Lyle Bierma

## Introduction

I am not a trained missiologist or an expert in Christian missions; by trade I am a church historian who over the past forty years has done a fair amount of teaching, research, and writing on the Reformed confessions, particularly the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>1</sup> But I have always had an interest in the mission outreach of the church. That stems from the several years I lived in West Africa as a child of missionary parents, from service later on as a short-term missionary educator myself in Nigeria and four other countries, and from spending the first half of my teaching career at an undergraduate institution that helped prepare people for cross-cultural mission careers. So this topic of the Canons

of Dordt as a missional document nicely brings together my professional and non-professional interests.

The confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including the so-called Three Forms of Unity of the Dutch Reformed tradition, have sometimes been criticized for not addressing the missional or evangelistic nature and task of the church.<sup>2</sup> One counterexample to this claim, of course, is a line in Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 86:

Q. ... Why then should we do good works?

A. ... So that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits ... *and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.*<sup>3</sup>

However, there is also missional material in the early Reformed confessions in a place we might least expect it, namely, the Canons of Dordt (hereafter CD). This brief essay will take a closer look at some of that missional material in the CD and argue that the Canons both promotes a mission vision and, because of its historical context, places some potential obstacles in the way of implementing that vision.

## Missional Material in the CD

What is striking and may be surprising to some is that the CD contains missional material in nearly every one of its main points of doctrine. The First Main Point on election and reprobation, for example, is wrestling with the question of why some people believe the gospel and others do not. Eventually, this opening canon takes us back to God's eternal decree, but the first five articles of the canon actu-

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ally begin with history, not eternity. Article 1 posits the universal sinfulness of humanity in Adam,<sup>4</sup> and Article 2 highlights God's response in history to human sin, paraphrasing John 3:16: "But this is how God showed his love: he sent his only begotten Son into the world, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."<sup>5</sup> Article 3 then proceeds to the *means* that God uses to bring people to faith. Here it cites the great so-called "missionary" text from Romans 10:

In order that people may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends *messengers of this very joyful message to the people* and at the time he wills. *By this ministry people are called* to repentance and faith in Christ crucified. For "how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without someone preaching? And how shall they preach unless they have been sent?" (Rom. 10:14-15).<sup>6</sup>

All of that appears in just the First Main Point of Doctrine (sometimes referred to as "unconditional election"<sup>7</sup>). In the Second Main Point on the death of Christ ("limited atonement"), we encounter in Article 5 what one Reformed theologian once called "a kind of *Magna Charta* for missions."<sup>8</sup> However we might understand limited atonement in the CD, it certainly does not entail limited proclamation:

Moreover, it is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, *ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people*, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

This universal scope to the gospel call is underscored in Article 8, where we are told that "it was God's will that Christ through the blood of the cross...should effectively redeem *from every people, tribe, nation, and language* all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the Father."<sup>10</sup>

The Canons' Fourth Main Point of Doctrine, which deals with the way in which conversion occurs ("irresistible grace"), makes clear that although conversion is ultimately the work of God, God uses

human means to help bring it about: "What, therefore, neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God accomplishes by the power of the Holy Spirit, *through the Word or the ministry of reconciliation*. This is the gospel about the Messiah, *through which* it has pleased God to save believers, in both the Old and the New Testaments" (Article 6).<sup>11</sup> And

the fact that many who are called *through the ministry of the gospel* do not come and are not brought to conversion must not be blamed on the gospel, nor on Christ, who is offered *through the gospel*, nor on God, who calls them *through the gospel*...but on the people themselves who are called.... The fact that others who are called *through the ministry of the gospel* do come and are brought to conversion must not be credited to human effort.... No, it must be credited to God. (Articles 9, 10)<sup>12</sup>

In these and in other places in the CD, it is clear that the task of the Christian community is not just to live godly lives so that their neighbors may be won over to Christ but also to bring and proclaim the gospel of reconciliation to the whole world. Furthermore, we should remember that this vision in the CD was given concrete expression a short time later in the Synod of Dordt itself, when at several points in the proceedings the Dutch delegates submitted gravamina and discussed matters related to the conversion of "the heathen" in the Netherlands' colony of the East Indies.<sup>13</sup>

### Potential Impediments in the CD to the Carrying Out of the Missionary Task

There are, however, at least three potential obstacles in the CD to the implementing of this missional vision. The first is an impediment of our own making and cannot really be laid at the feet of the Canons itself. In a celebrated doctrinal dispute in the Christian Reformed Church in North America in the 1960s, known as "The Love of God Controversy," Professor Harold Dekker of Calvin Theological Seminary summarized this potential obstacle as follows:

The doctrine of limited atonement [in the CD]... has commonly been used to place a taboo on the proposition that Christ died for all men and on any statement by a missionary to unbelievers such as, "Christ died for you." Supposedly such

language is Arminian. ... The doctrine of limited atonement as commonly understood and observed in the Christian Reformed Church impairs the principle of the universal love of God and tends to inhibit missionary spirit and activity.<sup>14</sup>

Dekker argued that there are senses in which the CD *does* teach that Christ died for all people and in which proclaimers of the gospel *can* say to all listeners, “Christ died for you.”<sup>15</sup> This has been corroborated in recent scholarship, which has demonstrated that the formulation of the second head of doctrine in the Canons actually represented a compromise between many of the Contra-Remonstrants at the Synod of Dordt and the British delegation, which advocated a hypothetical universalist view of the atonement.<sup>16</sup> The most articulate spokesman for the English version of hypothetical universalism was the Anglican delegate John Davenant, who held that although Christ died effectually for the elect alone, he died sufficiently for all people in that he merited the *possibility* of salvation for all. By his death, Christ satisfied for the sins of the whole world, not in the sense that the sins of all were pardoned by his death (a benefit he obtained only for the elect) but that the sins of all were made pardonable. Davenant did not claim that God intended to save everyone; God grants the blessings of salvation only to those whom he has elected and only upon their repentance and faith. But the atonement does make all people redeemable or reconcilable, such that if they did repent and believe, they would be saved. The universality of this satisfaction for sin, according to Davenant, provides the grounds for the undifferentiated and indiscriminate offer of the gospel to all nations and people that the CD talks about elsewhere in the Second Main Point of Doctrine. For Davenant, to deny the universal sufficiency of the atonement in this sense would undermine the logic and validity of the gospel offer itself.<sup>17</sup>

In these and in other places in the CD, it is clear that the task of the Christian community is not just to live godly lives so that their neighbors may be won over to Christ but also to bring and proclaim the gospel of reconciliation to the whole world.

This does not mean, according to these recent scholars, that the CD explicitly teaches this English version of hypothetical universalism. But the British delegates at the synod influenced the shape of the final text of the Canons in such a way that this view was not excluded and that, in the end, allowed Davenant and his colleagues to sign and support the document.<sup>18</sup> This would mean, therefore, that the CD does not have to be read in a way that prohibits the evangelist from declaring to an audience of unbelievers, “Christ died for you.”

A second potential impediment to the implementation of the CD’s missional vision is that the references in the confession to the *human* role in the mission of God are overshadowed by the much greater emphasis on the *divine* role in salvation: The First Main Point of Doctrine is primarily about election and reprobation by God the Father, the Second Main Point primarily about atonement by God the Son, and the Fourth Main Point

primarily about regeneration and conversion by the God the Holy Spirit. Statements about the human proclamation of the gospel are few and far between and nearly hidden from view. This is certainly understandable in the context in which the CD was written: the Calvinist party at the Synod of Dordt was responding to what they considered a significant threat to the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation. But can and did such an imbalance in the CD contribute to a diminished sense of the part that human beings play in the gathering in of the lost?

This question can be illustrated by thinking of an individual’s path to salvation as leading through a doorway or gateway.<sup>19</sup> Over one side of the door God has written, “Whosoever will may come,” and over the other side, after someone has stepped through it, he/she sees that God has written, “Chosen before the foundation of the world.” The Scriptures call the church to spend its time and energy on the near side of the door, declaring the mes-

sage to all nations and people that whosoever will may come. The Canons, however, focuses most of its attention on the far side of the door, highlighting the work of *God* in choosing, redeeming, and converting those who do come. What kind of subtle message might that have sent? Did such a disproportionate emphasis in the CD on the divine role in bringing people to faith contribute at all to the kind of thinking that William Carey, the so-called father of modern missions, encountered in Reformed circles nearly 200 years later when he was about to embark on his historic mission to India? On one occasion, after Carey had introduced his missionary aspirations to a group of ministers, one of the ministers reportedly exclaimed, “Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.”<sup>20</sup> One of the things we are reflecting on at this conference is the consequences of the theology of Dordt. Could this kind of thinking at the turn of the nineteenth century have been an unintended consequence of that theology?

A third and final potential obstacle to the carrying out of the CD’s mission vision is the harsh and polarizing language the confession sometimes uses for the Arminians, most notably in the Fifth Main Point of Doctrine, Article 15:

This teaching about the perseverance of true believers and saints, and about their assurance of it—a teaching which God...impresses on the hearts of believers—is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the spirits of error attack. The bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God...will ensure that the church will continue to do this.<sup>21</sup>

Again, given the political context and polemical atmosphere of the day, language of this kind is probably not surprising. But it could have caused further damage to the witness of the one, holy, catholic church by portraying the doctrine of perseverance as something that divides Christians from non-Christians. On one side of the divide in this article are those who hate, ridicule, abuse, and attack this teaching, who are identified as the flesh,

the world, the ignorant, the spirits of error, and even Satan. On the other side are those who love this teaching, whom the CD identifies as believers, the church, and the bride of Christ. Article 15 does not attach specific names to these two groups, but it is not difficult to figure out who they are. Was theological disagreement about perseverance really of such a magnitude that the Calvinists at the Synod of Dordt could no longer consider the Arminians who questioned it a part of the bride of Christ? Moreover, how much and for how long down through the decades might this kind of confessional language have shaped attitudes that prevented the two traditions from recognizing each other as fellow Christians or working cooperatively in the worldwide mission enterprise? Jesus’ prayer in John 17 was that the church be brought to complete unity so that the world might know of God’s love and believe in him. Did such polemical language in the CD have as a consequence the weakening of the church’s witness and outreach to the world?

Perhaps a better model for us on this score is the relationship of two famous evangelists a century later, one an Arminian (John Wesley) and the other a Calvinist (George Whitefield). Throughout their lifetimes, these two men fiercely debated the doctrines addressed in the CD, especially predestination, but always remained friends and worked cooperatively in the great revivals of the eighteenth century. The story is told that one of Whitefield’s followers once asked him, “Will we see John Wesley in heaven?” Whitefield replied, “I fear not. He will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him.”<sup>22</sup> When Whitefield died in 1770, Wesley preached the funeral sermon at three of Whitefield’s chapels in London. He spoke lovingly of his friend and, regarding their theological differences, stated, “There are many doctrines of a less essential nature with regard to which even the most sincere children of God...are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may ‘agree to disagree.’”<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

When it comes to the missional nature and task of the church, the CD may not live up to all



of our twenty-first-century expectations. We must remember, however, that this was 1619, four hundred years ago, a whole century before Ludwig von Zinzendorf and the first breakout of global Protestant missions by the Moravians, and two hundred years before William Carey and “the great century” of Christian missions in the 1800s.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the CD was a confession whose primary purpose was to defend the sovereignty of God in salvation—salvation *sola gratia*—against what seemed like an Arminian reversion to the kind of soteriology that the Protestant Reformation had repudiated just a century before. Finally, in spite of the strong emphasis on divine sovereignty in the Canons, we also find there an affirmation of the gospel as a message that requires human messengers as God’s instruments to proclaim that good news to the entire world. In that respect, the Canons of Dordt is a truly remarkable missional document.

#### Endnotes

1. E.g., Lyle D. Bierma et al., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Lyle D. Bierma, *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism: A Reformation Synthesis*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013).
2. For some examples of this criticism, see Yuzo Adhinarta, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Major Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Carlsle, CA: Langham Monographs, 2012), 163–64.
3. “The Heidelberg Catechism,” in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013), 101 (italics added).
4. “The Canons of Dort,” in *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013), 119.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid (italics added).
7. This terminology is from the well-known mnemonic acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.
8. Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Missionary Focus of the Canons of Dort,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7 (November 1972): 214.
9. “Canons of Dort,” 127 (italics added). The Latin text of the italicized phrase is “omnibus populis et hominibus...promiscue et indiscriminatim annunciari et proponi debet” (Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* [1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 561), which an older English translation quaintly rendered as “ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons *promiscuously* and without distinction” (“Doctrinal Standards of the Christian Reformed Church,” in *Psalter Hymnal* [Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1934], 51; italics added).
10. “Canons of Dort,” 127 (italics added).
11. Ibid., 131 (italics added).
12. Ibid., 131, 132 (italics added).
13. Chauncey Knegt, “That Christ Be Honored: The Push for Foreign Missions in the Seventeenth-Century Reformed Church in the Netherlands,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 10 (July 2018): 265–68; Jan Jongeneel, “The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius: The First Comprehensive Protestant Theology of Missions,” trans., John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (April 1991), 48; Herman H. Kuyper, ed., *De Post-Acta of Nahandelingen van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht in 1618 en 1619 gehouden* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1899), 150, 166, 184, 237, 261–62, 267, 437, 441, 443, 463, 468. My thanks to Donald Sinnema for some of these references in the *Post-Acta*.
14. Harold Dekker, “God So Loved—ALL Men!” *Reformed Journal* 12 (December 1962): 7.
15. Ibid., 6–7.
16. See, e.g., William Robert Godfrey, “Tensions Within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974), 268; John Platt, “Eirenical Anglicans at the Synod of Dort,” in *Reform and Reformation: England and the Continent c.1500–c.1750*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 221–43; John Platt, “Les Anglais à Dordrecht,” in *La Controverse Interne au Protestantisme (XVIe–XXe siècles)*, ed. Michel Peronnet (Montpellier:

- Université Paul-Valéry, 1983), 109–28; Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 417–24; Lee Gatiss, “The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 143–163; and Michael J. Lynch, “John Davenant’s Hypothetical Universalism: A Defense of Catholic and Reformed Orthodoxy” (PhD diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2019), 174.
17. Lynch, “Davenant’s Hypothetical Universalism,” 175–222.
  18. *Ibid.*, 268–69.
  19. For part of this illustration I am indebted to Richard J. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 47.
  20. Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 123.
  21. “Canons of Dort,” 139–40.
  22. Fred R. Sanders, *Wesley on the Christian Life: The Heart Renewed in Love* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 239. According to Sanders, this story was reported by the nineteenth-century English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, who went on to say, “In studying the life of Wesley, I believe Whitefield’s opinion is abundantly confirmed—that Wesley is near the eternal throne, having served his Master, albeit with many mistakes and errors, yet from a pure heart, fervently desiring to glorify God upon the earth.” Unfortunately, Sanders provides no documentation for either the citation from Spurgeon or the Whitefield story itself.
  23. Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 172.
  24. The phrase “the great century” is from the titles of volumes 6–8 of Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1941–44).